

# Eastern Mediterranean Sea Dispute: Exploring Sustainable Resolutions

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## Abstract

The Eastern Mediterranean Sea is home to vast reserves of natural resources, including oil and gas, and is the subject of an ongoing dispute over maritime boundaries among Türkiye, Greece, Cyprus, Egypt, Israel, and Lebanon. This paper aims to examine the Eastern Mediterranean Sea dispute, focusing on the role of natural resources, particularly oil and gas. It analyzes the origins and evolution of the dispute, considering the involved stakeholders. The legal and political frameworks governing exclusive economic zones and continental shelf boundaries are explored, along with the competing claims of the parties. The paper argues that historical tensions, conflicting national interests, and a lack of trust contribute to the dispute, further exacerbated by resource competition. In light of these findings, the paper proposes sustainable solutions, such as diplomatic dialogue, a joint commission, development plans, and adherence to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea for dispute settlement.

## Keywords

Eastern Mediterranean Sea, Boundary Dispute, Natural Resource, EEZ Delimitation, Resolutions

## 1. Introduction

The Eastern Mediterranean Sea dispute is an ongoing and complex conflict involving competing claims to maritime boundaries and Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) by several countries in the region. Greece, Cyprus, Türkiye, Egypt, Israel, and Lebanon are all parties to this multifaceted dispute, making it highly complex in nature. The roots of the conflict lie in the unresolved Cyprus issue, with Türkiye

and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) contesting the rights of the Greek Cypriot Administration to exploit the island's natural resources. Recent discoveries of significant hydrocarbon resources in the Eastern Mediterranean have further intensified the dispute, with various states vying for control over the region's valuable resources [1]. The situation has been worsened by military brinkmanship and an increase in naval presence, raising concerns about the potential for armed conflict. Diplomatic efforts to resolve the dispute through negotiation and mediation have proven unsuccessful so far, with each party taking a hardline stance and refusing to make concessions. The complexity of the conflict is compounded by overlapping maritime claims, the status of disputed islands and islets, and the absence of a comprehensive regional framework for maritime cooperation and resource management [2].

The dispute has also drawn the attention of the international community, including the European Union (EU), the United States (US), and the United Nations (UN). The EU has called for the parties to refrain from unilateral actions and to engage in dialogue and negotiation to resolve the dispute. The UN has been involved in efforts to resolve the Cyprus issue and has supported the resumption of negotiations between the Greek Cypriot Administration and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. The UN has also called on the parties to show restraint and to work towards a peaceful resolution of the maritime dispute in the Eastern Mediterranean. Different approaches have been taken by Germany and France towards the ongoing tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean between Türkiye, Greece, and Cyprus. Germany has called for the EU to act with soft power to reduce tensions and preserve cooperation with Türkiye on migration. Meanwhile, France has taken a harder stance, accusing Türkiye's President Erdogan of pursuing an expansionist policy that is incompatible with European interests and is a factor for destabilization. Türkiye is an important partner for the EU on trade, counter-terrorism, and migration, and the EU needs to engage with the Turkish government in areas of mutual interest. Here, it is evident that the EU's main interest in the Eastern Mediterranean is conflict prevention rather than energy security. While the EU has called for the sovereign rights of its members Cyprus and Greece to be respected, a tough line on Türkiye's maritime rights is widely shared by political parties in Türkiye, and a consensus for economically significant sanctions is unlikely to be reached. The EU should continue to engage with all parties involved and promote dialogue and cooperation to reduce tensions and prevent conflict in the region [3].

The paper explores how the Eastern Mediterranean has turned into a battleground for competing powers, including Türkiye, Greece, Cyprus, Egypt, and Israel, to assert their influence and gain access to the region's vast natural gas reserves. This study concludes by offering some sustainable solutions to resolve this longstanding dispute for the peaceful coexistence of the littoral states.

## **2. Strategic Importance of the Eastern Mediterranean Sea**

The Eastern Mediterranean Sea comprises approximately half or a third of the

Mediterranean Sea. It includes the Adriatic Sea, which is located northwest of the main body of the Eastern Mediterranean Sea (**Figure 1**). The Adriatic Sea separates the Italian peninsula from the Balkan peninsula and stretches from the Strait of Otranto in the south, connecting the Ionian Sea to the Gulf of Venice in the north. Both EU and non-EU countries have coastlines along the Eastern Mediterranean. The EU countries encompass Italy, Slovenia, Croatia, Greece, and Cyprus, while the non-EU countries consist of Albania, Montenegro, Bosnia-Herzegovina with coastlines on the Adriatic Sea, as well as Türkiye, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, the Gaza Strip, Egypt, and Libya with coastlines on the Aegean and/or Levantine Seas.



**Figure 1.** Eastern Mediterranean sea [4].

(<https://www.mei.edu/publications/growing-alignment-between-gulf-and-eastern-mediterranean>)

The Eastern Mediterranean's geostrategic, diplomatic, and economic influence holds greater significance in contemporary times, presenting prospects for Türkiye, Greece, Cyprus, and Israel while simultaneously amplifying the obstacles and risks that lie ahead. The region has captured the attention of major global powers such as the US, Russia, and China. It is home to determined regional actors who exert significant influence on the sociopolitical landscape of the area [5]. Additionally, international diplomacy has the potential to establish strong relationships between states. The region is currently facing the Gaza war while also possessing two significant natural gas basins with intact reserves. These resources could play a key role in the region's transition from oil dependence to alternative energy sources. However, the ongoing violence, whether driven by internal conflicts or domestic turmoil, appears resilient to resolution through external interventions or appeals to international law. The Eastern Mediterranean has also seen severe rivalry among major regional powers, coupled with a protracted period of insecurity and suspicion regarding the

sociopolitical future of the states in the region [6].

Israel is emerging as a dominant force in the field of information technology, while Cyprus possesses the capacity to serve as a dependable ally to the Western world in facilitating the region's evolution into a hub of technological progress. The US has demonstrated a sustained presence in the region following a brief yet significant period. Its relocation of the US Embassy to Jerusalem and continued support for Israel in the ongoing Gaza war represents a crucial political maneuver that could potentially pose a threat to the constructive measures toward resolving the complex issue of the Palestinian Question. The importance of the Sixth Fleet's role has increased as a result of Washington's reactivation of the Second Fleet with the intention of bolstering the US and NATO presence in the Atlantic. The United States has demonstrated a discernible inclination to confront Russian sharp power and its ramifications in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Balkan region in their entirety [7].

### 3. Disputed Claims over Energy Resources in EEZ

The Eastern Mediterranean region, with its vast reserves of natural gas totaling 9.8 trillion cubic meters, has become a source of contention among its coastal states [8]. In an effort to diversify its natural gas sources, the EU has been backing initiatives like the East Med Pipeline Project. However, the high cost of laying pipelines poses a significant challenge. Additionally, lower natural gas prices and the emergence of alternative energy resources could diminish the overall interest in the region. Understanding the legal framework surrounding the ongoing disputes is crucial in navigating this complex situation. The conflicts in the Eastern Mediterranean primarily revolve around the delimitation of EEZ and continental shelves, driven by the potential abundance of natural gas resources. Notably, the 2004 declaration of an EEZ by the Greek Administration of Southern Cyprus (GASC) is deemed illegal. Meanwhile, Greece and Türkiye have yet to formally declare their respective zones, creating further ambiguity. Consequently, coastal states find themselves with unacknowledged continental shelves, and Türkiye, in particular, holds a substantial shelf in the region, which Greece and the GASC unlawfully claim as their own (Figure 2). These conflicting claims have resulted in heightened tensions in the region.

Greece and Türkiye are engaged in a conflict concerning the distribution of natural gas resources in the Eastern Mediterranean. Greece supports the use of median lines in delimitation as a means to establish their share, while Türkiye proposes the method of enclavement, which considers the proportional relationship between coastline lengths and relevant continental shelf areas. This disagreement has led to increased tensions in the region, and France's support of Greece is driven by its interests in Libya.

The GASC has signed EEZ delimitation agreements with Egypt, Lebanon, and Israel, but Türkiye disagrees with their authority to make claims over the entire island of Cyprus. Türkiye argues that the licenses issued by GASC are illegal and infringe on Türkiye's continental shelf, as well as the rights of the Turkish Cypriot



**Figure 2.** Turkish claim in the Eastern Mediterranean [9].

(<https://greekcitytimes.com/2020/08/28/britain-greece-turkey-and-the-aegean-does-any-thing-change/>)

people and the TRNC. As a result, the conflict has spread throughout the entire sea, leading to instability in the region [10]. France has expressed its support for Greece and Cyprus in the maritime border dispute in the Eastern Mediterranean. It has criticized Türkiye's exploration activities in waters claimed by Greece and Cyprus. Additionally, France has conducted military exercises in the region and called for an EU-wide response to the conflict, including the potential imposition of sanctions against Türkiye. France has taken a firm stance against Türkiye's actions and has aligned itself with Greece and Cyprus in the conflict [11].

Türkiye has been clarifying the extent of its claimed areas through various means, including official communications, bilateral delimitation agreements, and petroleum concessions granted to *Türkiye Petrolleri Anonim Ortaklığı* (TPAO). Türkiye firmly believes that all areas beyond the territorial waters of the GASC to the west of Cyprus belong to its continental shelf or EEZ. Additionally, Türkiye aims for the boundary between itself and Egypt to be determined by the median line. The most contentious area lies between Türkiye and Greece, where Türkiye argues that the boundary should not extend to maritime areas belonging to Greek islands beyond their territorial waters. To assert its claims in the Eastern Mediterranean and challenge the claims of other countries in the region, Türkiye has presented an official map (Figure 3) illustrating its claims, including those established in its agreement with Libya on November 27, 2019, which employs the median line approach [12].



**Figure 3.** Türkiye and Libya's maritime boundary [13].

([https://journal.iag.ir/article\\_142882\\_905b18a2e1ef01d5fd02e40c19760990.pdf?lang=en](https://journal.iag.ir/article_142882_905b18a2e1ef01d5fd02e40c19760990.pdf?lang=en))

Türkiye's position has resulted in tensions with Cyprus, Greece, and other countries in the region who perceive Türkiye's actions as violations of their sovereignty and territorial integrity. The EU and some other countries have also condemned Türkiye's actions and called for a peaceful resolution of the dispute through dialogue and negotiation [14].

The Eastern Mediterranean Sea dispute is characterized by a negation between Israel and Egypt regarding natural gas resources. This dispute revolves around competing claims over territorial boundaries and energy resources. At the heart of the issue is the desire to export gas from Israel to Egypt and construct an underwater pipeline to facilitate gas exports from Israel to Europe via Egypt. However, this project has faced considerable challenges due to disagreements over maritime boundaries. Türkiye has opposed the pipeline, while Greece and Cyprus have raised concerns as well. These disputes have led to the emergence of new energy alliances and increased tensions in the region.

In response to Türkiye's actions, Israel, Egypt, Greece, and Cyprus have formed the East Mediterranean Gas Forum, bringing together eight countries, including France, Italy, Israel, Egypt, Greece, Cyprus, Palestine, and Jordan, which is actually considered by some experts as a political maneuver against Türkiye. While Israel and Egypt have generally adopted a neutral stance in the broader regional conflict, they have strengthened their partnerships with Greece and Cyprus for the development and transportation of natural gas [15].

#### 4. Delimitation Theory under International Law

The UNCLOS, 1982 establishes international legal principles for delineating EEZ. These zones are maritime areas that extend 200 nautical miles (370 kilometers) from a coastal state's baselines. Within the EEZ, the coastal state is granted special rights to explore and exploit natural resources. The rules governing the delimitation of EEZs are outlined in Articles 74 and 83 of UNCLOS. Article 74 pertains to

the delineation of the EEZ between adjacent or opposing coastal states, while Article 83 concerns the delineation of the continental shelf beyond the 200 nautical mile limit [16].

The delimitation of EEZs is governed by key principles, including method of equidistance, relevant circumstances, special circumstances, and good faith negotiations. The equidistance method is the starting point for delimitation, but it can be modified where it leads to an inequitable result. Relevant circumstances, such as islands and continental shelf, must also be considered. Special circumstances, such as historic rights, require adjustments to the delimitation line. Negotiations should be conducted in good faith, but UNCLOS provides for dispute settlement mechanisms in cases where no agreement can be reached [17].

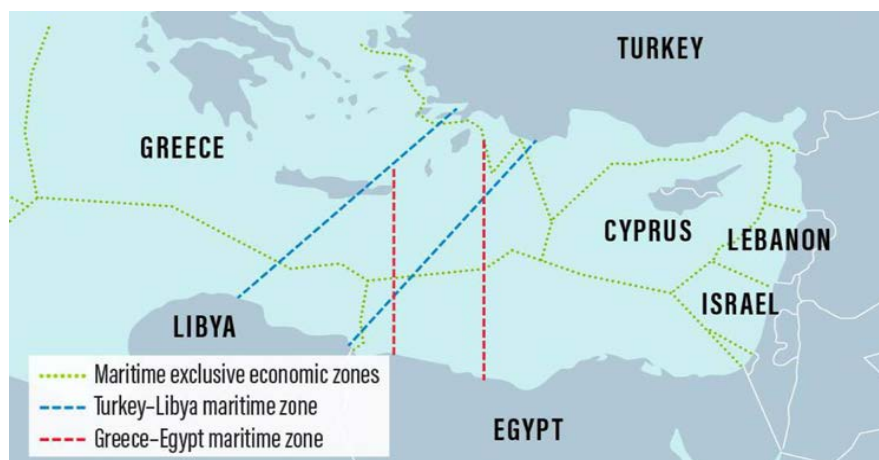
International law has established three distinct criteria for demarcating a continental shelf: the 1958 Geneva Convention, the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), and customary law. To ensure equity, the delimitation process should be conducted with fairness. Treaties are legally binding for concerned parties, while customary law applies to the public. In the case of Türkiye, which has not ratified these conventions, customary law should govern its continental shelf delimitation. This process must be equitable and based on the principle of the “superiority of geography.” Except as provided for in paragraph 3 of Article 121 of the UNCLOS, islands are also eligible for continental shelves, but factors such as their geographical location, population, and economic activity must be considered. Historically, international courts have set limits on maritime areas or refrained from awarding maritime areas beyond territorial waters to islands located on the opposite side of a median line between two sovereign states’ mainland territories [10].

## **5. Türkiye’s Stand of the Delimitation with Greece, Egypt and Cyprus**

Türkiye contends that customary law and conventional law do not prescribe distinct rules for the delimitation of maritime boundaries and that such delimitation must be guided by the principle of equity. It rejects the equidistance method as the exclusive means for maritime delimitation and instead advocates for an equitable approach. Moreover, Türkiye stresses the application of the principle of equity in the delimitation of all maritime zones, including territorial waters. To achieve an equitable outcome, Türkiye puts forth specific principles of delimitation, namely “land should dominate the sea,” “no cut-off effect” on maritime areas, and “reasonable proportionality between respective coasts and maritime areas,” which have been derived from the jurisprudence of international courts.

Türkiye posits that equity is the paramount principle of maritime delimitation, necessitating mutual agreement between adjacent or opposing states to achieve equitable outcomes. It also maintains that islands do not automatically generate full maritime jurisdictional zones, and their contribution should be disregarded if it results in an inequitable outcome. Türkiye underscores that the length of coastlines

should take precedence as the most critical geographic factor relevant to attaining equitable delimitation, with a fair degree of proportionality between the lengths of relevant coastlines and maritime areas.



**Figure 4.** Competing maritime zones in the Eastern Mediterranean [18]. (<https://www.alestiklal.net/en/article/the-race-to-extend-influence-over-the-mediterranean-amid-the-huge-discoveries-of-energy-resources>)

Türkiye stresses that the particular geographical circumstances of the Eastern Mediterranean, being a semi-enclosed sea, must be factored into the delimitation dispute (Figure 4). It asserts that the length of the Turkish coastline and coastal projection of the Turkish mainland should not be diminished by the Greek islands, and their contribution should be disregarded to prevent the severance of the projection of the Turkish mainland and an inequitable result. Additionally, Türkiye argues that the existing political status of the island of Cyprus should be considered in the delimitation dispute in the region [12].

## 6. Greece's Stance in Delimitation

Greece believes that all of its islands are entitled to both a continental shelf and an EEZ, and provides references to international law to support its position. Conversely, Türkiye agrees that islands may have maritime zones, but argues that their effect on maritime boundary delimitation should be limited in certain circumstances. Türkiye's established stance has been that islands should be treated as special circumstances in maritime delimitation. In order to delimit maritime zones, Türkiye emphasizes the importance of considering the length and direction of its coastline. Specifically, Türkiye contests Greece's claims regarding the island of *Kastellorizo* and argues that it may only be given territorial sea, but not a continental shelf and exclusive economic zone, according to the jurisprudence of relevant international courts.

Greece argues that the delimitation of the continental shelf and EEZ between states should follow the equidistance/median line principle, which is based on international law. This belief is reflected in Greek national legislation and has been

recorded with the UN. Greece maintains that international courts and tribunals have affirmed the importance of the equidistance line in maritime delimitation under UNCLOS Articles 74 and 83, as well as relevant customary international law. These articles require delimitation to be based on international law to achieve an equitable solution.

The positions of Greece and Türkiye with regard to the delimitation of their continental shelf and EEZ in the Eastern Mediterranean differ. Greece follows the equidistance/median line method based on international law, while Türkiye insists on an equitable solution that considers relevant circumstances such as regional geography, the presence of islands, and historical rights. The ‘Seville map’ (**Figure 5**), which depicts a delimitation based on equidistance that gives full effect to Greek islands, has become a contentious issue between the two countries. Although Türkiye cites UNCLOS Articles 74 and 83, it argues that equitable delimitation is of utmost importance. Notably, Türkiye established an equidistance line in its 2019 MoU with Libya but prefers a median line in its delimitation with Egypt [19].



**Figure 5.** Seville map of the Eastern Mediterranean [20].

([https://www.keeptalkinggreece.com/2020/09/22/seville-map-us-turkey-greece/#google\\_vignette](https://www.keeptalkinggreece.com/2020/09/22/seville-map-us-turkey-greece/#google_vignette))

## 7. The Interests of the Disputing Parties

The Eastern Mediterranean Sea is one of the most important seas in the world, with vast strategic importance and significance from geo-political and geo-economics perspectives. So, all the parties to the dispute have a substantial interest in this semi-enclosed sea. Consequently, no state in this longstanding dispute is willing to leave space for others.

### 7.1. Türkiye

The Eastern Mediterranean Sea holds significant importance for Türkiye due to

several reasons. One crucial objective for Türkiye is to reduce its strategic vulnerability and dependence on foreign energy sources. As a result, the country is actively exploring potential energy reserves in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Black Sea [21]. Moreover, Türkiye's geopolitical position as a populous and expansive nation plays a crucial role. It serves as a major transit point connecting the Balkans, the Caucasus, the Middle East, and the Eastern Mediterranean [22]. This strategic location enhances Türkiye's influence and facilitates trade and transportation between these regions. Additionally, Türkiye has emerged as a hub for economic development in the Middle East.

Over the years, its foreign trade volume has witnessed a significant increase, nearly tripling from \$87.613 billion in 2002 to \$299.423 billion in 2010 [23]. This growth has positioned Türkiye as a key player in the region's economic landscape. Nevertheless, Türkiye's aspirations to assert itself in the East Mediterranean have led to geopolitical tensions with Greece and Cyprus. Resolving these disputes poses significant challenges and complexities in international law and diplomacy [24].

## 7.2. Egypt

Egypt recognizes the immense value and numerous opportunities present in the Eastern Mediterranean, particularly in the exploration and extraction of natural gas and oil. These resources have the potential to drive Egypt's economy forward, making the region of great interest to the country. As a testament to its importance, Egypt and Greece have recently signed a historic maritime demarcation accord, aiming to establish Egypt's EEZ and foster expanded energy cooperation in the Eastern Mediterranean [25]. The most feasible and efficient option for Egypt is the implementation of a natural gas liquids (LNG) route from Egypt to Greece. This route promises swift realization and offers Egypt a direct and sustainable source of revenue, bolstering the nation's financial stability and growth [26].

In addition to the economic significance, the Eastern Mediterranean holds profound historical and cultural importance for Egypt. With a long and illustrious history of power and influence in the region, dating back millennia to Ancient Egyptian civilization, Egypt can draw upon its historical legacy as it navigates the complexities of the Eastern Mediterranean. By fostering collaborative partnerships with neighboring countries, particularly Greece, Egypt aims to build a sustainable and prosperous future while honoring the region's rich heritage [27]. Moreover, the establishment of a well-defined Exclusive Economic Zone enables Egypt to assert its rights and interests in maritime resources, ensuring responsible and sustainable utilization of these valuable assets for the benefit of present and future generations. The accord with Greece represents a significant step towards regional stability and cooperation, fostering an environment that promotes mutual prosperity.

## 7.3. Greece

Greece has been actively pursuing a more assertive foreign policy in the Eastern

Mediterranean, aiming to solidify its position and influence in a region that is marked by tensions arising from conflicting maritime interests, energy claims, and military exercises [28].

The country is determined to reclaim its status as a significant player in the Mediterranean by fortifying its presence, specifically in the eastern part of the region. This renewed vigor in Greece's foreign policy is manifested through a series of strategic initiatives and collaborations.

In pursuit of its objectives, Greece has been actively engaging with neighboring nations, such as Egypt, Israel, and Cyprus, with the aim of strengthening regional partnerships and fostering greater cooperation on critical issues like energy security and maritime safety [29]. By building strong alliances with these countries, Greece seeks to create a united front in the face of shared challenges and promote regional stability. The economic dimension also plays a crucial role in Greece's endeavors in the Eastern Mediterranean. The country recognizes the vast potential of the region's natural resources, particularly the exploration and development of natural gas deposits. By capitalizing on these resources, Greece aims to not only bolster its own economy but also enhance its influence and leverage in the region. Through targeted investments and collaborations, Greece seeks to establish itself as a key energy player, contributing to the diversification of Europe's energy sources and ensuring long-term energy security for itself and its partners.

Moreover, Greece's assertive foreign policy approach is underpinned by a commitment to safeguarding its national interests, asserting its sovereign rights, and preserving regional stability. In navigating the complex geopolitical landscape of the Eastern Mediterranean, Greece is working towards finding diplomatic solutions and engaging in dialogue to address disputes and conflicts. Simultaneously, it is actively participating in military drills and exercises to enhance its defense capabilities and deter potential threats, thereby safeguarding its maritime boundaries and ensuring the safety of its vital sea routes.

#### **7.4. Cyprus**

The nation of Cyprus holds considerable geostrategic importance within the Eastern Mediterranean region. Its advantageous location provides access to crucial maritime lanes connecting Europe and the Middle East, making it a key player in the region [30]. In recent years, the discovery of significant hydrocarbon reserves in the Eastern Mediterranean has propelled Cyprus into a prominent position within the energy industry. This newfound status is directly attributed to Cyprus' geographical location in the Eastern Mediterranean. Consequently, the region has witnessed a surge in attention, highlighting its geostrategic and economic significance.

Cyprus, situated strategically within the Eastern Mediterranean, commands attention due to its critical position. Not only does it serve as a vital link between Europe and the Middle East through its maritime lanes, but it also boasts abundant hydrocarbon reserves that have been discovered in recent years. This discovery has propelled Cyprus to the forefront of the energy industry, solidifying its role as a

major participant. Leveraging its location and the resources at its disposal, Cyprus has emerged as a significant player in the region's energy landscape.

The Eastern Mediterranean, now receiving increased scrutiny, showcases its geostrategic and economic importance. Cyprus, with its prime location, acts as a gateway connecting continents and serves as a bridge for maritime trade. Moreover, the substantial hydrocarbon reserves discovered in the region have sparked international interest and transformed Cyprus into a focal point of energy exploration and production. As a result, the significance of the Eastern Mediterranean has been amplified, captivating the attention of various stakeholders and emphasizing its geopolitical and economic relevance.

### **7.5. France**

Due to its strategic location and the significance it holds for French interests, France has been closely monitoring the East Mediterranean Sea for a considerable period. An analysis by Issuu highlights the pivotal role played by the Mediterranean in advancing French interests, ensuring domestic stability, and upholding international influence [31]. Furthermore, France possesses major security concerns, trade connections, and cultural and social ties in the Middle East. These factors have collectively contributed to an increased French engagement in the region over the past decade.

One notable aspect of France's heightened involvement is the augmentation of its military presence in the Eastern Mediterranean, which coincides with the ongoing tensions between Greece and Türkiye concerning oil and gas exploration in disputed waters [32]. This observation aligns with France's decision to bolster its military presence in the Eastern Mediterranean. Additionally, France actively promotes naval security cooperation across a wide geographical expanse, ranging from the Eastern Mediterranean to Asia. This includes conducting joint military exercises with countries such as Israel and Cyprus, which are held annually [33]. Through these efforts, France aims to enhance maritime security, strengthen regional alliances, and safeguard its own interests in the Mediterranean and beyond.

### **7.6. Lebanon**

Lebanon's negotiations with Israel over the maritime boundary have been revitalized due to a confluence of both internal and external factors. Domestically, political and economic turmoil, coupled with mounting pressure from the international community to implement reforms, has compelled the political leadership to act. The dispute over the maritime boundary has presented an opportunity for Lebanon to garner support from the United States. The priorities of the political class have shifted from political to economic objectives, aiming to rejuvenate the natural gas industry as a means of stabilizing the country's economy and securing foreign currency inflows. The eagerness of the US, France, and Israel to achieve an agreement has further reinforced these internal drivers of change [34].

The former President of Lebanon, Michel Aoun, declined the one-sided extension

of their economic waters and is now seeking renewed intervention by the United States to settle the ongoing maritime boundary conflict with Israel. An alternative option that could potentially integrate Lebanon into the regional structure and bestow it with influence and advantages is the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF), which Lebanon previously refused to join due to the presence of Israel. However, granting observer status to Lebanon in the EMGF could be a viable and desirable possibility. Nevertheless, the intricate political situation in Lebanon poses a challenge for decision-makers to adopt this approach [35].

### **7.7. Israel**

Israel's involvement in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea can be attributed to several strategic interests. These interests include the necessity to maintain a naval presence in the region, the expansion of its exclusive economic domain, access to natural resources, and the potential for economic gains. The coastal region of Israel stretches over 195 kilometers and encompasses 4,000 square kilometers of territorial waters, along with an additional 22,000 square kilometers of exclusive economic territory [36]. This particular location hosts a total of seven marinas and five operational ports. Moreover, the average annual fish catch in this area amounts to 2,200 tons. Israel's naval forces have been stationed in the Eastern Mediterranean for approximately three decades, imposing a naval blockade on the Gaza Strip during this time. They have also conducted regular inspections and seized cargo on ships transporting armaments, predominantly from Iran, destined for Hamas-controlled Gaza and Hezbollah in Lebanon. These search operations and seizures occur frequently.

Given the natural gas reserves and shipping routes in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea, Israel's access to this region holds significant strategic importance. Consequently, Israel faces competition from other global powers such as the United States of America, the European Union, China, Russia, and Türkiye [36]. Addressing the issue of coastal erosion along the Mediterranean coast, Israel has implemented beach nourishment as a substantial component of its response since the program's initiation in 2011. This approach is considered environmentally responsible and characterized by its "gentle" nature.

### **7.8. Italy**

Primarily as a result of its location on the southernmost tip of Europe, the nation of Italy possesses a strategic interest in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea. In addition, the deep-sea port of Taranto, which is located in Italy on the southernmost tip of the Italian peninsula, holds a vital position in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea. The Mediterranean Belt and Road program in Italy has its principal focus point located in the city of Taranto, which serves as the port. The goal of the effort is to expand Italy's market reach in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East by developing infrastructure and commercial routes in the Mediterranean region. Specifically, the program will focus on the Mediterranean region. The fact that Italy is a member

of the European Union, the Council of Europe, and NATO helps to ensure the country's continued protection of its vital interests in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea. As a direct consequence of this, Italy plays an important part in the process of fostering peace and order in the region [37] [38].

### **7.9. Germany**

For many years, even predating the uprisings in 2011, Germany has actively engaged in promoting stability and economic cooperation in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea region. Its involvement began prior to the uprisings, and since then, Germany has significantly increased its Official Development Assistance (ODA) to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Consequently, Germany is now recognized as a significant contributor to the development and humanitarian efforts in the region [39].

Given its strategic location as a gateway to the East and ongoing conflicts and tensions between governments, the Eastern Mediterranean poses distinct geostrategic concerns. These challenges arise due to the region's location. Germany, with its robust trade and industrial history, holds a significant presence in the region's economy. The changes in commodity shipping routes and internal disputes among Italy's city-states, both influencing trade, have positively impacted Germany's commercial activities.

Germany has expressed its interest in fostering economic cooperation and stability in the Eastern Mediterranean region through various channels, including grants for development and humanitarian assistance. Additionally, Germany is keen on pursuing its economic interests in the region, particularly in the fields of commerce and manufacturing, which hold particular significance for the country [40].

## **8. Reasons for Unresolved Disputes**

The Eastern Mediterranean region is plagued by deep-rooted conflicts among countries such as Greece, Türkiye, Cyprus, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Egypt, and Libya. These nations hold conflicting views on their rights to exploit offshore energy resources in the area, which holds five percent of the world's total natural gas reserves [41]. The desire to benefit from these resources has further exacerbated existing tensions and led to new conflicts. The drilling crisis in the Eastern Mediterranean did not arise suddenly but is a result of Greece's longstanding ambition to control natural gas resources and transit routes in the region, as well as the Turkish protests and the TRNC's rejection of what they perceive as unjust treatment regarding their rightful license on the continental shelf [42]. The illegal activities of the GASC, which endanger regional stability, have been overlooked despite years of their occurrence, culminating in the crisis at hand.

Efforts to establish sovereignty over potential natural gas resources in the Eastern Mediterranean are primarily manifested as disputes over the delimitation of the continental shelf and EEZ in accordance with international law. An EEZ is a maritime area that a coastal state legally acquires through declaration. Türkiye

and Greece have not declared their EEZs, resulting in the absence of any state having an EEZ in this region. However, the GASC, in defiance of its authority, unlawfully proclaimed an EEZ in 2004, purporting to represent the entire island of Cyprus. This declaration holds no legal standing and is thus invalid [41]. Additionally, a long-standing issue of contention in the region involves the movement of migrants crossing the Eastern Mediterranean Sea by boat [43]. However, the following issues have been identified as major factors for impeding the settlement process of the Eastern Mediterranean dispute among the littoral states.

### 8.1. Unilateral Actions

The discovery of significant natural gas reserves in the Eastern Mediterranean has heightened tensions between countries in the region. Greece, Cyprus, and Israel have claimed exclusive rights to exploit the resources, while Türkiye has contested these claims and pursued its own exploration efforts in the region. This has resulted in a series of diplomatic standoffs, maritime incidents, and military threats. The lack of resolution to the EEZ disputes is rooted in broader political and historical factors, including long-standing tensions between Greece and Türkiye and the conflict in Cyprus. These issues have made it difficult for the countries in the region to come to a mutually acceptable solution to the EEZ disputes [44].

The region is rich in natural resources, including oil and gas reserves, and several countries have overlapping claims to these resources. If the parties in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea dispute act unilaterally without considering others and exploit these resources, it is likely to lead to an escalation of tensions and potentially result in disputes and even military confrontation. For example, Greece, Türkiye, and Cyprus have been involved in several disputes over drilling rights in the region. In 2020, tensions flared up between Türkiye and Greece over the exploration of gas reserves in the Eastern Mediterranean, with both countries conducting military exercises in the region. If parties act unilaterally, it could lead to a situation where each country tries to secure its interests without regard for the interests of others, which could intensify the conflict [21].

Furthermore, acting unilaterally could also lead to the exclusion of other stakeholders in the region, such as the EU, which has been trying to play a role in mediating the dispute. The EU has a vested interest in the stability of the region, as it is an important energy transit route and a potential source of gas for the EU. If parties act unilaterally, it could limit the EU's ability to play a role in resolving the conflict. On the other hand, if the parties in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea dispute work towards common ends, it could lead to a more stable and cooperative regional environment. Instead of competing against each other, countries could work together to address shared challenges and opportunities in the region.

For example, the countries could cooperate on the development of energy resources in the region, such as by sharing pipelines or coordinating their exploration and production activities. This would not only benefit the countries involved but could also contribute to Europe's energy security. Unilateral actions by the parties

involved in the dispute within the disputed area of the Eastern Mediterranean affect the settlement process.

## **8.2. Lack of Cooperation**

The Eastern Mediterranean Sea is rich in natural gas and other resources, and several countries in the region have competing claims over these resources. If the parties involved agree to cooperate and work together to resolve these disputes, it could lead to joint exploration and development of resources in the region, benefiting all parties involved. Resolving the EEZ and continental shelf delimitation disputes in a cooperative manner could lead to economic benefits for all parties involved. Cooperation could enable the countries to more effectively develop and manage their natural resources and reduce their dependence on external actors. It could also enhance regional economic integration, creating opportunities for increased trade and investment.

Delimitation of the continental shelf is an important issue for the parties involved as it determines the extent of their jurisdiction over the natural resources in the seabed and subsoil. If the parties agree to cooperate in resolving their overlapping claims, they could work together to define the boundaries of their respective zones and jointly exploit any resources in disputed areas. Agreeing on EEZ and continental shelf boundaries could help reduce tensions and the risk of conflict in the region. By working together and finding mutually acceptable solutions, the parties could promote peace and stability and create a conducive environment for economic development.

Cooperation on the delimitation of maritime boundaries could also contribute to the development of international law and norms, particularly regarding the interpretation and application of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. This could have broader implications for maritime disputes around the world, promoting greater stability and security in the international system. In the Eastern Mediterranean maritime conflicts, the cooperative attitude among the disputed parties is almost absent in resolving their conflicts.

## **8.3. Failure of the Parties**

Türkiye places a high priority on the Eastern Mediterranean region for various geopolitical, geostrategic, and economic reasons. Firstly, as a significant energy importer, Türkiye relies on other nations like Russia and Iran to meet its energy needs. Consequently, the country must prioritize the development of its domestic energy resources. Secondly, Türkiye aims to establish itself as a major energy transfer center, connecting the markets of Europe, the Middle East, and Asia, thereby strengthening its geostrategic and economic position. Thirdly, Türkiye's involvement in the Middle East is being challenged by Egypt and Israel, who seek to exclude Türkiye from the region's politics by forging alliances with Greece and Cyprus. Türkiye needs to respond by playing a more active role in countering these efforts by Egypt and Israel [41].

Furthermore, the Greek Administration of Southern Cyprus has concluded EEZ delimitation agreements with Egypt, Lebanon, and Israel as if it were the sole representative of the entire island. However, the GASC lacks the authority to act on behalf of the entire island of Cyprus, including making agreements or declaring license areas for the island's natural resources [41].

On the other hand, Greece was the first country in the region to advocate for the concept that islands share the same continental shelf as the mainland. The midline system serves as the basis for Greece's approach. Greece argues that the boundary between the Turkish and Greek continental shelves should be determined by a line running from the coast of Anatolia to the coast of the Greek islands, advocating for this method. This indicates Greece's attempt to impede Türkiye's access to the Mediterranean shore despite Türkiye having a coastline at least ten times longer than Greece's own [45].

It is true that France has political and commercial interests in Libya and the broader Mediterranean region, which drives its involvement in maritime issues against Türkiye. Despite France's public stance, its legal case for delineating maritime borders aligns closely with Türkiye's position. In the dispute between France and Britain over the Channel Continental Shelf, France argued for the enclave approach for British islands off the coast of France, which was adopted by the tribunal in 1978. Türkiye seeks a similar resolution concerning the Greek islands [46].

The Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus and Libya have agreed to demilitarize their shared border, and Türkiye has initiated seismic survey activities within its own continental shelf. Türkiye currently holds licenses for TPAO (Turkish Petroleum Corporation) operations in the western and southwestern regions of the island of Cyprus. Türkiye's main point of contention in this dispute is that, based on equitable principles, the demarcation region west of the island of Cyprus, the west coast of the island of Cyprus, and the Greek islands in this area should be enclaved. Türkiye safeguards its long coastline through the protection of territorial waters to prevent separation from coastal waters and the continental shelf [47].

Nevertheless, when delimiting the continental shelf between two or more coastal states, these islands should either have limited influence or be completely disregarded, considering their specific geographical characteristics, to ensure equality. Establishing the center line between the Turkish shore and the Greek islands would not result in equality if there were to be a delimitation of the continental shelf between Türkiye and Greece. While this approach may allocate a significant amount of the continental shelf area to the short coast of the islands, it would likely prevent the existence of a continental shelf along Anatolia's long coast. Such a restriction cannot be considered equitable [41].

However, in any dispute or conflict, the involved parties should prioritize coming forward and leaving room for peaceful and friendly resolution by others. Regrettably, in the East Mediterranean Sea conflict, the disputing parties have failed to reach a fruitful agreement to resolve this longstanding dispute due to their indifference toward maintaining peaceful coexistence in the region.

## 9. Possible Solutions

A sustainable and equitable resolution to the Eastern Mediterranean Sea dispute regarding EEZ and continental shelf boundaries is feasible, but it necessitates a sustained commitment to dialogue and diplomacy among the parties involved. One argument proposes the establishment of a regional mechanism for jointly exploring and exploiting natural resources, which could provide a framework for cooperation and collaboration. Additionally, employing international law and diplomacy can help build trust and promote a peaceful resolution to the conflict. Tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean over maritime boundaries and hydrocarbon resources are currently high between Türkiye, Greece, and Cyprus. If left unchecked, this conflict could potentially escalate into a wider Middle East conflict involving much of Europe. The only way to break the deadlock is for Türkiye and Greece to engage in direct negotiations, facilitated by Germany's current efforts. The European Union should urge the resumption of exploratory talks that address legal and political disputes, while encouraging Türkiye and Greece to explore the possibility of joint ventures for undersea resource exploration in disputed maritime areas. Recognizing their mutual interests, both the EU and Türkiye should cooperate, and NATO should play a role in preventing confrontation [48].

Türkiye prefers resolving conflicts through political negotiations, whereas Greece prioritizes adherence to legal principles. However, both sides acknowledge the need for compromise, leading to extensive meetings and discussions among experts from both countries to identify possible elements of a settlement [49]. Germany has proposed mediating between Greece and Türkiye, while Macron's approach echoes Greece and Cyprus' condemnation of Türkiye, disregarding the legal requirement of equitable resolutions for exclusive economic zone disputes. Türkiye has called for bilateral negotiations with Greece to reach a reasonable solution. The dispute over Kastellorizo, a Greek island with a significant EEZ, remains a major point of contention between Greece and Türkiye [50]. Failure to resolve it could perpetuate regional tensions and hinder comprehensive Greece-Türkiye reconciliation. Any conflict would have serious consequences, including disruption of energy investment, harm to transatlantic security, and damage to crucial Türkiye-EU relationships [51].

Nonetheless, the Eastern Mediterranean Sea dispute between Türkiye, Greece, and others is a complex issue with historical, territorial, and geopolitical dimensions. Consequently, resolving this dispute is not possible unless the parties involved prioritize it. Given the complicated nature of the conflict, the following specific potential solutions may be proposed to alleviate tensions and achieve a peaceful resolution.

### 9.1. Multilateral Diplomatic Dialogue

Given the complexity of the claims and the involvement of multiple countries, reaching a common agreement to accept the jurisdiction of judicial bodies such as the International Court of Justice (ICJ), International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS), or an Arbitral Tribunal to resolve the Eastern Mediterranean dispute is a challenging task. Therefore, one vital approach to resolving this dispute lies in

bilateral or multilateral diplomatic dialogue. It is crucial for Türkiye and Greece to engage in such dialogue and work towards finding mutually acceptable solutions to the issues at hand. Similarly, other parties involved in the dispute should initiate diplomatic efforts to seek a conclusion through dialogue with one another. This process allows the disputing parties to shape the initiative according to their specific needs, without the involvement of third parties. Consequently, reaching an agreement to resolve the dispute becomes easier.

However, initiating diplomatic dialogue among the parties involved is one of the main challenges in this context. Achieving a lasting solution to the Eastern Mediterranean Sea dispute between Türkiye, Greece, and other nations will require compromise, goodwill, and a commitment to peaceful resolution. The parties involved must be willing to engage in open and constructive discussions, acknowledging the complex nature of the issues at stake. It is essential for all parties to approach the dialogue with a genuine intention to find common ground and address the concerns and interests of each party involved. By fostering an environment of trust and respect, the parties can lay the foundation for a successful diplomatic process.

Furthermore, it is crucial to recognize that diplomatic dialogue does not guarantee immediate resolution, but it offers a framework for building understanding, exploring potential solutions, and gradually narrowing the differences. Patience and perseverance are vital during the dialogue process, as finding mutually acceptable solutions may require time and multiple rounds of discussions.

To facilitate a successful diplomatic dialogue, it is advisable for the parties to seek the assistance of mediators or facilitators who can provide guidance and support throughout the process. These neutral third parties can help create a conducive environment for dialogue, ensure a fair and balanced exchange of perspectives, and offer creative suggestions for bridging the gaps between the parties.

## **9.2. Joint Commission**

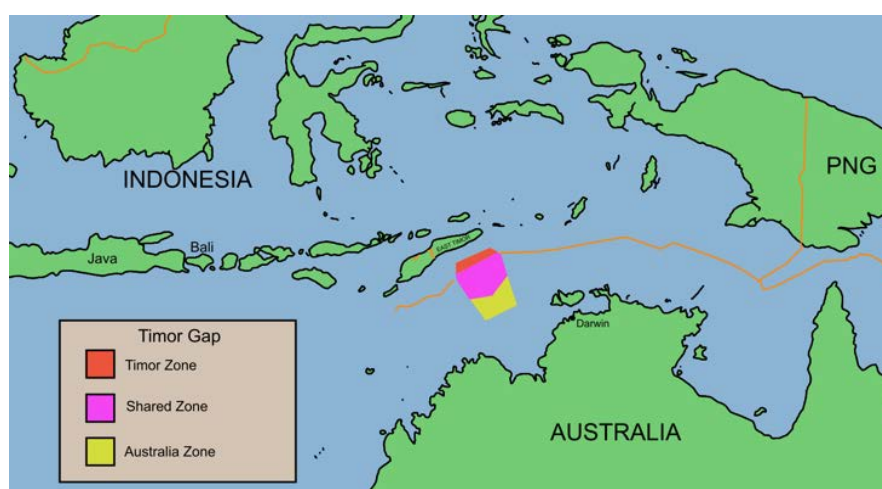
A joint commission formed with equal participation of the members of the disputed parties may be another important means for the settlement of this maritime dispute in the Eastern Mediterranean. This commission will be liable for finding a unanimously accepted settlement process. It could be given full responsibility to deal with the issues of dispute and explore the method of resolution independently. Because each nation was affected by the other's actions in the lake and river systems along the border, the US and Canada introduced a joint commission in 1909 to address a wide range of concerns related to industrial development, air pollution, and boundary waterways [52]. For the benefit of current residents as well as future generations, the two nations work together to manage and safeguard these waters. With equal treatment for both parties, this panel was created as a six-member quasi-judicial body to find a long-term solution to the issue along the Canadian–American border, appointing three commissioners to the commission from each side [52]. It was a globally perceived effective structure to manage changing bilateral issues as well as a creative model for dispute resolution. This commission was

fruitful due to its impartial nature and authenticity on the grounds that its members were the same in number from every state [52].

The joint commission between the US and Canada could serve as a model for the issue in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea. An international joint commission could be established to look for a settlement process that has the support of equal members from each of the claimants. Because contested concerns of sovereignty can be resolved all at once, joint commission settlement provides greater benefits than ordinary arbitration. An impartial regional commission that fairly and evenly represents all of the parties to a dispute may be more credible and authoritative than international arbitration. However, in the case of the Eastern Mediterranean, it is difficult for a number of representatives of the disputed countries to come to a unified consensus. In this regard, both sides to the conflict should be proactive and sincere about bringing it to a resolution process.

### 9.3. Joint Development Plan

By designating the Eastern Mediterranean Sea as a semi-enclosed sea, a cooperative development plan might be a successful strategy for resolving the conflict there. In accordance with UNCLOS Article 123, coastal states in a “semi-enclosed sea” are encouraged to collaborate in order to manage resources, protect the environment, and conduct scientific studies [53]. The opposing parties may give up their claims to sovereignty and designate the area as a “semi-enclosed sea” in order to jointly exploit resources for their mutual advantage. It’s possible that the Timor Gap Treaty between Australia and Indonesia is the best illustration of a collaborative development success story [54]. The Timor Gap Treaty, signed in 1989, ended a seventeen-year dispute over the delineation of seabed boundaries by establishing a “zone of cooperation” between Australia and Indonesia for further prospecting and resource exploitation [54] (Figure 6). In a part of the Timor Sea seabed that was claimed by both Australia and Indonesia, it allowed for the mutual exploitation of petroleum resources [54].



**Figure 6.** Zone of cooperation between Australia and Indonesia [55].  
([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Timor\\_Gap\\_map.PNG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Timor_Gap_map.PNG))

The issue facing the claimants in the Eastern Mediterranean is somewhat identical to that of Australia and Indonesia. Due to their refusal to give up their territorial claims to the Timor Gap, Australia and Indonesia came to an alternative agreement known as the Timor Gap Treaty. However, in the case of the Eastern Mediterranean, it is crucial that all disputed parties be willing to embrace this possibility to resolve their issue.

#### **9.4. Settlement under UNCLOS**

The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, established in 1982, plays a vital role in resolving maritime disputes [56]. When the parties involved in a dispute fail to undertake any settlement procedures, they can seek assistance from UNCLOS. Resolving the Eastern Mediterranean dispute through the provisions of UNCLOS could be a viable alternative. According to Article 74 of UNCLOS, the delimitation of the exclusive economic zone between states with opposite or adjacent coasts should be achieved through an agreement based on international law, as outlined in Article 38 of the Statute of the International Court of Justice, to ensure an equitable solution. If reaching an agreement proves challenging, UNCLOS Part XV provides four dispute resolution mechanisms: the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea, the International Court of Justice, arbitration by a specialized arbiter, or arbitration by a panel of experts approved by the states. These options are accessible to all states, including non-UNCLOS members who do not have diplomatic recognition of each other [44]. By mutual agreement, the parties involved could seek resolution from these impartial entities [24].

Moreover, international law and organizations can effectively prevent conflicts and maintain peaceful relationships between countries, particularly when the disputing parties exhibit mutual respect and a willingness to accommodate opposing views. Additionally, in the Eastern Mediterranean dispute, governments should be receptive to innovative solutions, efficient resource management, and prioritization of energy requirements and growth, irrespective of ongoing conflicts. The involvement of a neutral third party, such as the United Nations or the European Union, could also facilitate the resolution of the dispute.

### **10. Conclusions**

The disputes in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea have been a contentious issue among the countries in the region for decades, and the discovery of gas and natural resources has only heightened the stakes, leading to increased tensions and disputes over the delimitation of exclusive economic zones and continental shelves. However, negotiations and the involvement of parties such as the United Nations and the European Union offer a possible solution. It is recommended that the countries involved prioritize diplomacy and compromise to reach a mutually beneficial agreement. Such an agreement would not only resolve the dispute but also promote stability and economic prosperity in the region.

The United Nations and the European Union, along with the participation of

other countries, play crucial roles in achieving a possible solution. The UN actively facilitates negotiations between the parties, while the EU provides financial and diplomatic support for finding a resolution. Additionally, countries like the United States, Russia, Germany, and China contribute by offering diplomatic support and seeking peaceful solutions.

The Joint Declaration, agreed upon by the Foreign Ministers of Cyprus, Egypt, France, Greece, and the United Arab Emirates on May 11, 2020, expresses concern over growing tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea and emphasizes the importance of adhering to international law, particularly the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. The document highlights the significance of freedom of navigation and overflight, as well as a peaceful approach to dispute resolution. The Ministers pledge support for Cyprus and Greece in establishing their maritime boundaries and commit to enhancing cooperation in areas such as energy, security, and defense. Finally, the declaration urges the parties involved to restart negotiations to address outstanding matters in the region.

Overall, the involvement of these organizations and countries has been crucial in mitigating tensions and promoting dialogue among the parties in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea dispute. For example, the UN has played a critical role in facilitating talks between Greece and Türkiye, including the resumption of exploratory talks in January 2021. Additionally, the EU has provided financial assistance to foster dialogue and cooperation among the countries in the region. Similarly, other countries like the United States have engaged in diplomatic efforts to promote stability and peaceful resolutions. It is recommended that these efforts continue to intensify, focusing on cooperation, compromise, and mutual benefit for all parties involved. By working together, the countries in the region and the international community can help achieve a peaceful and sustainable resolution to the Eastern Mediterranean Sea dispute, leading to stability and prosperity for the entire region. Ultimately, it is crucial for all parties to collaborate towards a peaceful and sustainable future in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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